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SCIENCE

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THE BRITISH ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF SCIENCE THE PLACE OF PURE MATHEMATICS¹

IT is not a very usual thing for the opening address of this section to be entrusted to one whose main energies have been devoted to what is called pure mathematics; but I value the opportunity in order to try to explain what, as I conceive it, the justification of the pure mathematician is. You will understand that in saying this I am putting myself in a position which belongs to me as little by vocation as by achievement, since it was my duty through many years to give instruction in all the subjects usually regarded as mathematical physics, and it is still my duty to be concerned with students in these subjects. But my experience is that the pure mathematician is apt to be regarded by his friends as a trifler and a visionary, and the consciousness of this becomes in time a paralyzing dead-weight. I think that view is founded on want of knowledge.

Of course, it must be admitted that the mathematician, as such, has no part in those public endeavors that arise from the position of our empire in the world, nor in the efforts that must constantly be made for social adjustment at home. I wish to make this obvious remark. For surely the scientific man must give his time and his work in the faith of at least an intellectual harmony in things; and he must wish to know what to think of all that seems out of gear in the working of human relations. His

¹ Address of the president to the Mathematical and Physical Science Section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, Birmingham, 1913.